

What's your MINISTRY?

In our new series, we celebrate how our skills, interests or hobbies can open the door to a new ministry or opportunity

This month: GARDENING

Interviews by Sharon Barnard



Author Clare Nonhebel is a gardening volunteer with Livability – a national disability and community engagement charity. The charity runs a variety of services including Livability Holton Lee in Poole, Dorset. Set in 350 acres of countryside, the centre uses horticultural therapy to build confidence, grow wellbeing and support people as they develop life skills.

There's a sense of timelessness about gardening: people have been digging and planting and making things grow through every century and in every culture.

As I child I loved visiting my uncle, who managed a market garden – people and

plants working together and thriving. When I visited Livability Holton Lee on an open day last year, there was that same atmosphere. In the gardens, the Flourish team – staff, service users and volunteers – were not only growing plants, but also growing trust, community and purpose.

I hesitated to volunteer. Physical stamina is a problem for me and a few hours weeding each week wasn't much to offer. But this horticultural therapy project, for people with every kind of disability, is not called Flourish for nothing. There's an openness to trying out new growing methods, experimenting with different plants – and finding the best environment for each person.

With other volunteers and service

users who choose these tasks, I weed, plant and dig over vegetable beds. The stronger ones, young and old, carry out hard landscaping with a staff member who is a carpenter. Some people with mobility problems or debilitating physical conditions sit working in the greenhouse. A couple with dementia come and help the weeders or just sit and watch and enjoy being shown beetles or odd-shaped stones.

Tea breaks are sacred. It's easy to push yourself gardening, finishing just one more job then suddenly feeling exhausted. Here, work stops at 11.30am and people re-group in the community room and take stock of how everyone's doing.

Some of the gardeners battle anxiety or depression daily. Here, they say, they feel better, not only when things are going well and seeds they have sown are growing, but also when battling the gardener's enemies: weather, slugs, rabbits, moles and mice!

One man said, "It's like boxing – it gives you energy when you fight, even if you don't always win!" Another woman commented that she spends her life in an artificial environment and here, working in wind and rain, she feels real.

Gardening on this scale needs co-operation and every skill is needed, whether knowing a weed from a plant, heavy lifting, concentration in pruning a bush or gentleness with potting up seedlings. Respect for the process of growing reflects respect for individual people and for the team.

There are stormy days, moods of weather and of human emotions, though the staff are quick to respond. There's always Plan B – time out with a distressed person in the quiet room, or a mass dash into the polytunnel when it starts pouring with rain.

I started out offering an occasional few hours weeding, but from day one I was drawn in by the sense that these people are special. I don't see it as a ministry but a privilege: being in an environment where God can minister to all of us.

It's exciting to see someone brave their first day here feeling nervous and the odd-one-out. Then, after a very short time, become enthusiastic and energised. They may only be wheeling a barrow of weeds to the compost heap or laughing while helping to pull out a stubborn root, but something is lifted off them.

I don't know why it feels like the kingdom of God, but it does. ■

+ Clare Nonhebel is an author of 13 books, the most recent one co-written with a Death Row prisoner. Find out more about Livability Holton Lee at www.holtonlee.org
For information about the wider work of Livability visit www.livability.org.uk

Things I've learnt

- + Every person's life can flourish, given the right conditions.
- + Every success, however small, is big.
- + Tea breaks are sacred.
- + If someone weeds out your prize plant or tramples your seedlings, it creates space for forgiveness!

More gardening projects

Abigail Leach,
an environmental science graduate, is the Conservation Intern with A Rocha UK and oversees their work on two sites in West London



I work mainly at Wolf Fields in Southall. This was a dumping ground that A Rocha is transforming into a community garden for local people and wildlife.

We have a sensory garden, a thriving community allotment and we are planting an orchard. In the future we hope to get a storytelling area, a pond and a wildflower meadow in place.

I'd never managed anything bigger than a student essay before, so being chucked in at the deep end with ordering a shipping container to provide safe storage for the site, and getting it into place was a steep learning curve. It was a logistical nightmare but it looks really good now.

I strongly believe that God intends us to be the stewards of his creation. I think it must make God sad to see what we are doing to the planet because it makes me sad. The natural world is so beautiful and awe-inspiring, and I think we have a duty to preserve that for future generations.

+ For further details about A Rocha UK visit arocha.org.uk or call 0208 574 5935

Jill Smith
is a Lay Reader in the Church of England. When she retired from her job as a hospice chaplain, she and her husband Stuart started a 'Quiet Garden' at their home in Bromyard, Herefordshire



The garden is a haven for birds, butterflies and passing foxes, badgers, rabbits and hares. There is an orchard and wildflower meadow with three ponds, and my shed where you can sit and reflect, paint and just be.

As a quiet gardener I offer hospitality, a listening ear, lots of tea, coffee, cakes and biscuits to individuals and groups, and I also lead days by prior arrangement. Often a group will come with a leader but many just want the opportunity to be quiet for a day or an hour or two. That's just fine!

The tranquility, space, hospitality and the chance to reconnect with creation and its Creator is what people appreciate. People of faith and none and of other faiths are all welcome.

Elaine's Orchard (named after a close friend who enjoyed the peace of the garden while recovering from cancer) is most certainly a Christian ministry.

It's who I am. I am sharing what I have in hospitality and time. My example for this comes from the master, Jesus, who himself set time apart to listen and talk to his Father.

+ Elaine's Orchard is part of the Quiet Garden Movement which has a membership of more than 300 gardens worldwide. Discover more at <http://quietgarden.org> or call 01494 569057